

## Something That Unites Us

Mattias Irving

I spoke with a Christian environmental worker not too long ago, and he related to me how difficult it can be to express concern over climate change by referring to his Christian faith. It is unfortunately all too common for a person who expresses any kind of religious conviction to be treated with follow-up questions or critics. The facts disappear from sight all too easily in the discussion and, therefore, it might seem easier to simply refer to secular literature and research instead.

### Who is the Samaritan?

The problem goes deeper than merely lack of communication or historical controversies. It springs from the prejudiced mind *per se*. Prejudice divides and focuses on the differences between people. It tries to make out groups in the world and label them accordingly. At one time, the Samaritans were thought to be an inhospitable bunch; nobody would have expected help from any of them. Nowadays, we ought to know that helpers come in all shapes and from all places, and ask ourselves “does it really matter just where the helper comes from?”

To put it a little differently, would it be relevant or even appropriate to say that the earth itself has wishes and a consciousness? I wouldn't venture so far. But let us ponder for a moment what she would say to us if she had the opportunity.

Would she pause and ask, “in what God's name have you come to rescue me? I would not be saved by just anyone”. No, probably not. I believe that if the earth itself could speak, she would be quite uninterested in whether her saviours were Christians or atheists. And so should we.

### Our only home

Space is barren, hostile and vast in every sense of the word. Sensible people, like the renaissance scientist Blaise Pascal, have turned their gaze skyward and trembled deep in their hearts as they have begun to fathom the incredible, cold eternity of space. Our home is but a tiny, barely even visible speck of blue in a cosmic ocean of immense depths. It's our only home among the stars.

Maybe you recognize this phrasing? It's a paraphrase from the lovely and world-famous work of astronomer Carl Sagan, called *Cosmos*.<sup>1</sup> It was a stunningly poetic and sublime TV series from 1980, many years ahead of its time in the issues it addressed. When we confront a person, such as Carl Sagan, (who was an avid spokesman of science and convincingly outspoken in his anti-religious standpoints) and acknowledge his burning compassion and love for this world, we are once again reminded of what unites us, rather than what separates us.

---

<sup>1</sup> The television series *Cosmos*, PBS, 28 Sept.-21 Dec. 1980 based on the book: Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980).

Mozaik 27, *Climate Justice Now!*, “Something That Unites Us”, Mattias Irving, 2011.

Subscribe to Mozaik by visiting [www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/](http://www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/)

## Looking for the common ground

I believe that this is where all our interests converge – atheists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists; all the people of the world share a common home under the beautiful, blue sky of planet earth. In this we are as brothers and sisters. I ask again, does it really matter in whose name we act, when we take action for the good of the planet itself? There is a very famous poem by John Donne, which I think everybody ought to read at least once in their life:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as  
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom  
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

-John Donne 1572-1631

To paraphrase this poem I'd therefore like to say: Do not ask me whom I serve, for I serve you.

But service to the planet, from whichever perspective we are departing, demands a steadfastness and dedication that is unusual to find. Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote in his magnum opus *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*<sup>2</sup> about 'the last men', those who loathed passions and lacked the ability to sacrifice themselves for anything. The last men are a sad sight to behold, stilled by the conveniences and lullabies of modern life to a mediocre and lukewarm existence, devoid of pain and struggle. They look down on the radicals; wanting something with every bone in your body is seen as something vulgar and innately befitting only the misfits in the eyes of those who no longer know what it means to freeze, to be hungry, to feel fear. But when compassion and passion thus dies out, there is nothing left of man anymore, according to Nietzsche.

## Empty words and a dark future?

Is it not odd then, that our politicians, when mother earth is knocking on the door, show the same, at best lukewarm, willingness to act as Nietzsche's 'last man'? Nature does indeed not compromise. If CO<sup>2</sup> levels in the atmosphere climbs above certain limits it's the start, for all that we know, of a new and unprecedented dark period in the history of the world. We all share this fate, without exception or compromise.

Meanwhile, targeted emission cuts and international treaties have too often proven to be empty words. The political will is simply lacking. But how can it be so? How is it possible to not want to save our only home in space? It seems absurd to me.

---

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (Germany, 1885).  
Mozaik 27, *Climate Justice Now!*, "Something That Unites Us", Mattias Irving, 2011.  
Subscribe to Mozaik by visiting [www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/](http://www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/)

I think that Britain's former Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed the problem very aptly back in 2005, in Montréal: "The blunt truth about the politics of Climate Change is that no country will want to sacrifice its economy in order to meet this challenge".<sup>3</sup>

It's actually been a long time since I stopped believing in a political solution for the climate crisis, to be perfectly honest. Blair's statement quoted above was but the icing on the cake, the last nail in the coffin for my own trust in the efficiency of the political process. Since then I have come to suspect that Nietzsche's metaphor about the 'last man' might be even more accurate than he himself would have surmised.

### **Overcoming the divisions**

I believe that everyone who works for the survival of the planet acts in the name of God. We are called to action out of love for this earthly, heavenly place that is our origin and our home, and this deep feeling I believe to be the same whether we like to call ourselves Christians, atheists or whatever. But we have to rely on our Christian faith or our ideological beliefs to find the strength to resist – in fact, to exceed – the wallowing darkness of contemporary cynicism and short-sightedness.

In the words of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Schweitzer, we are called to act out of a reverence for life itself. Such reverence includes all of us and turns against the selfish way of thinking expressed by the likes of Tony Blair.

When we look out into the empty, inhospitable expanses of space we are right to fear, as Pascal did, for out there we will find no salvation. Space remains the hostile frontier of mankind's endeavours. But a divine mercy has given us this world alone and filled it with beauty. It is our only chance for life, happiness and peace. It is our home, and maybe the only thing that unites us all.

*Mattias Irving is a Swedish author, freelance journalist and philosopher. He studies philosophy at Södertörns Högskola (Stockholm) and presently writes for the Swedish progressive Christian think tank "Seglora Smedja". Mattias frequently writes on the topics of free culture, existential questions and postmodernism.*

---

<sup>3</sup> David Adam, "Blair signals shift over climate change", *The Gaurdian*, 2 Nov. 2005  
< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2005/nov/02/greenpolitics.frontpagenews>>.

Mozaik 27, *Climate Justice Now!*, "Something That Unites Us", Mattias Irving, 2011.

Subscribe to Mozaik by visiting [www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/](http://www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/)